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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER CO VE
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ'S PLAN AND URIBE'S BURDEN TO RECOVER
HOSTAGES

REF: BOGOTA 8657

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Hugo Chavez outlined a plan designed to secure the release of three hostages of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) in a December 26 press conference. The plan calls for the participation of international observers from Venezuela and six other countries and the use of an "air caravan", but is contingent on elements outlined in a letter to Colombian President Uribe. Throughout the briefing and subsequent Q&A, Chavez made it clear that he was trying to put the burden on the government of Colombia (GOC) to make the release happen. The Colombians quickly approved Chavez' plan with minor changes. According to local media, the mission will occur on December ¶28. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) At a December 26 press conference, Hugo Chavez claimed on December 23 the FARC had told him hostages Clara Rojas, her son Emmanuel Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez were ready to be handed over to Venezuelan authorities. Expounding on a series of telephone dialogues with FARC leaders and consultations with his mentor, Cuban President Fidel Castro, Chavez announced that his Vice Foreign Minister Rodolfo Sanz had delivered a plan to President Uribe in Bogota. Chavez also detailed his telephone diplomacy to French President Sarkozy and five Latin American leaders through which he said he had won a pledge from each of an observer to a team headed by his former Minister of Justice and Interior Ramon Chacin. The countries and observers are as follows: France - Ambassador Hadelin de La Tour-du-Pin, Cuba - Ambassador German Sanchez Otero, Brazil - presidential advisor Marcos Aurelio Garcia, Argentina - former president Nestor Kirchner, Bolivia and Ecuador had not yet named their members.

¶3. (SBU) Explaining that he wanted the process to be public and transparent, Chavez promised copies of his letter to Uribe to the media and detailed that, upon approval from the GOC, an "air caravan" consisting of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft - carrying the international observers and the media - would leave from one of four designated airfields, fly into Colombia and return to Venezuela with the three hostages.

¶4. (SBU) Throughout the briefing, Chavez was careful about predicting the success of the operation, stressing the need for GOC approval as well as pointing out possible complications from weather, the mountainous jungle terrain, the fact they were flying into a war zone and the inherent

dangers of mounting a rescue operation.

¶15. (SBU) The media reported that the Colombians quickly approve the plan, appointing Peace Commissioner Dr. Luis Carlos Restrepo (Reftel) as the GOC point of contact. The GOC also added the condition that any aircraft participating in the mission show the red cross emblem of the ICRC. Venezuelan media reported that Pablo Rondon, Venezuela's ambassador to Colombia, announced the operation would happen on December 28.

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